

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE **B29**BOSTON GLOBE
19 January 1986

BOOKS

WITH THE CONTRAS

A Reporter in the Wilds of
Nicaragua

By Christopher Dickey. Simon
& Schuster. 327 pp. \$18.95.
Illustrated.

By Walter LaFeber

On May 30, 1983, at Xally's Hotel in Danli, Honduras, the whores backed away as two top field commanders of the Nicaraguan Democratic Front (the FDN, or *contras*, as they are best known to North Americans), lurched into a fight. The struggle erupted "because of a girl, or a remark, or maybe a look in the eye," Christopher Dickey recalls in this riveting account. One *contra* pulled out a Browning automatic pistol and blew the other man away. A *contra* simply explained to Dickey that the war among the FDN leaders sometimes resembled "the Wild West with submachine guns and AK-47s." Earlier, another *contra* leader had dispatched troops on a suicide mission against the skilled Nicaraguan government forces the *contras* are trying to overthrow. He ordered the mission because he lusted after the wife of one of those troops. "That son of a bitch Krill ambushed his own troops, just to get rid of them," an associate observed with both wonderment and hatred.

These murderers, Dickey writes, were the *contra* commanders whom Ronald Reagan later compared with the US Founding Fathers. Such ignorance is not limited to the president. After evidence mounted that one *contra* leader alone had murdered more than 30 *contra* commandos, prisoners and civilians, CIA director William Casey made a quick trip to Honduras

(where the *contras* and their CIA sponsors share facilities), "held court" at the US Embassy and gave the impression that everything was fine. Reagan began to call the FDN "freedom fighters."

News soon leaked, however, that the *contras* needlessly massacred civilians (as well as each other) and that top leaders, including Enrique Bermudez, a former officer under the Somoza dictatorship who had been cleaned and pressed by the CIA for US congressional and television audiences, were

pocketing large amounts of CIA-provided funds. The CIA and Bermudez agreed that Hugo Villagra should be brought in to clean up the mess. Villagra, Dickey drily notes, was a protege of the Somozas, an associate of the Salvadoran death-squad leader Roberto D'Aubuisson and a former terrorist in Costa Rica. Villagra rounded up four of the *contra* murderers and convicted them before a tribunal of old Somoza followers especially flown down from Miami for the occasion. Rumor has it that several of the convicted were executed at a huge US airbase in Honduras.

But the executions produced an odd result. They eliminated some of the *contras'* ablest field commanders. The FDN has never been able to carry out a successful, sustained campaign against the Sandinistas, but in 1983-84 the Front's units virtually stopped fighting. The anti-Sandinista cause became totally dependent on CIA operatives and their "unilaterally controlled Latino assets" - Washington bureaucrats: for CIA-hired killers from other Latin American countries. Meanwhile, the Reagan administration told Congress and other North American audiences that the *contras* were "our brothers."

Dickey relates many of these stories from firsthand experience. A widely respected Washington Post reporter who has spent many years in Latin America, he moved with *contra* guerrillas inside Nicaragua as well as exploited his sources in the CIA and FDN leadership. His account of how he barely survived a Sandinista attack and then a nonstop trek over mountains to the safety of Honduras is harrowing, but it is also instructive about the *contras'* talent at fighting and surviving, even if they seem to be fighting more for the thrill of killing than for any conscious political ideology.

Dickey's analysis is balanced. He sketches the process whereby the triumphant Sandinistas of 1979 became a Nicaragua dependent on Soviet supplies and Cuban advisers by 1986. He regrets that the revolution parted company with its more moderate members, but he also carefully notes how US actions since 1979, and especially 1981, left the Sandinistas little choice. Dickey's history is sometimes shaky. He

misses the Carter administration's determination to abort the Sandinista victory in 1979, even to the point of working for a joint intervention with Latin American governments to prevent the triumph. He also neglects the evidence uncovered by Roy Gutman that as early as 1981-82 the Reagan administration publicly claimed that it wanted to negotiate with the Sandinistas while privately setting terms that made talks impossible.

But these are minor criticisms of a work that will become a standard account of how Reagan's Central American policy was conducted by the CIA and its *contra* associates. The story is well-documented, grippingly told and carefully argued. The CIA certainly

plays the pivotal role, but Dickey seems to hold special contempt for the US Congress. From the start of the Reagan policy in 1981, Congress could see that the real objective was not to interdict arms supposedly moving from the Sandinistas to the Salvadoran revolutionaries, or simply to pressure the Sandinistas into negotiations, but to use the CIA to overthrow a sovereign Nicaraguan government. When the *contras'* atrocities came to light in 1983, the administration's explanation to Congress was "a minuet of hypocrisy," Dickey writes. Few seemed to care.

Reagan and Casey sold their policy with abstractions ("democracy," "freedom") that had no relationship to Central American realities but further dulled the mind of those in Congress and televisionland. When a stupidly written CIA manual advocated breaking US law by "neutralizing" Sandinista officials, a top CIA operative, Duane R. Clarridge (alias "Dewey"), stilled criticism by telling a congressional committee that only the killing of heads of state should be counted as assassination. After presiding over various *contra* fiascoes and murders, Dewey, as Dickey records, received a promotion and the CIA's "highest bonus of 1983." The lawmakers finally mustered the courage to cut off aid in 1984, only to have Dewey's successors and Reagan convince them to reopen the supply line for "non-lethal" aid in 1985. Dickey's story graphically

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